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WHAT IS LITERATURE? AN ATTEMPT AT A DEFINITION.

There may be good reason to doubt whether by the general scholar or the lover of good books any formal definition of literature is needed, but to those who by choice or necessity spend much of their time in an honest endeavor to lead untrained and uncultured minds to a fuller appreciation of its contents and character, it must be clear that whatever tends to make impressions more definite is of especial value in a subject where loose and unconsidered generalizations are so common and so unfortunate.

Among the various meanings of the word "literature" that the dictionaries suggest, that of John Morley affords our best point of departure. "Literature," he says, "consists of all the books—and they are not so many—where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, severity, and attractiveness of form." But this definition, apart from its descriptive nature, seems to limit too narrowly the thing defined. It reduces literature to books; that is, it requires that it should be in printed or written form; second, it is inadequate; and third, the characterization of the proper form of literature is indefinite and ambiguous.

Schlegel's suggestive words also require limitation. "We embrace," he says, "under this name all those arts and sciences, those representations and productions, which have as their object life and mankind, but which, without resulting in any external fact, are effective in thought and language, and present themselves to the spirit in word and writing and in no other bodily form. To it belongs, above all, poetry, and next to that, narrative and descriptive history; reflection and higher knowledge, in so far as they have life and humanity for their object, and exercise upon both an influence; eloquence and finally wit, if their effects

do not pass away in fugitive words, but form works which last in writing or description. All this," he continues, "includes about the whole mental life of man," a statement that should have warned Schlegel that his definition did not define.

Mme de Stael says that she understands by literature, "poetry, eloquence, history and philosophy, or the study of human morality." But this, like many another attempt, gives us the divisions rather than the definition of our subject. A closer approach to a logical definition is made by Channing, who considers national literature to be "the expression of a national mind in writing." But here we miss some qualification as to the kind and character of the writing; and the same fault may be found with Newman's definition: "Literature is the expression of thought in language; . . . where by 'thought' I mean the ideas, feelings, views, reasonings, and other operations of the human mind."

When Professor Scherer defines literature as "the process of the most individual and innermost development," he seems to have in view this deep centre of our richest living. But literature, as we understand it, is not a process, but a result, so that this definition, too, is inadmissible. But one can agree heartily with him that "attention must be paid to the demands of art." Indeed, literary critics are now practically at one in insisting that the form as well as the matter must be taken into account.

This is well stated by Mr. Morley: "Literature, of all things on earth the most significant, is no chance feast of scraps; it is the best utterances of the mind of a people, which has for its embodiment deeds set forth by the historian." In this definition, "literature is the best utterances of the mind of a people," we have changed the point of view and the dynamic centre is the word "best," though its meaning is not wholly clear. If we are using words advisedly, "best" is very significant. It limits literature to that which is universally counted best, or it leaves it to any individual to determine his own standard of excellence and to exclude

any production which does not seem to him to attain it. Yet it is in this citation, rather than in any other, that the definition to be submitted found its starting point.

The problem seems to be this: To find a comprehensive and intelligible term, which, however, must be flexible and expansive, for the subject-matter of literature; and to define its form so that the standard may at once make definite demands, and yet not be rigid, preserving the human and the artistic elements. If we say that literature is the utterance of the mental life in artistic prose or poetry, it may be urged that literature is not all the utterance of the human mind, and that the words "mental life" apparently exclude the utterance of life other than that of the mind, while it certainly will admit of question whether literature is merely the utterance of the life of the author.

May not the definition be broadened into: Literature is the revelation of life in artistic prose or poetry? No one who has ever attempted to formulate a definition can have failed to recognize the difficulty in finding the exact word needed. Here, for example, is not "revelation," rather by its history than its origin, so limited and specialized as to be unserviceable? Does it not stand in such need of explanation as to be confusing? "Life," on the other hand, is a vague and varying term, without sharpness or clearness of meaning. It does not fully convey to us that the subject-matter of literature is that which belongs to, interests, or concerns humanity. In so far as it comes within the realm of that which interests man it is fit for literature; in so far as it in no wise concerns him it is of no avail. Indeed its fitness is in great measure determined by the intensity with which it appeals to man, and the extent to which it appeals to men. The depth and catholicity of the subject-matter is the measure of its worth.

These considerations lead one to substitute for "life," "human interests," and to look for some other word than "revelation." What if we should say: "Literature is the representation of human interests in artistic prose or poet-

ry"? With this definition literature seems to fall under the head of the representative arts by virtue of the *genus* "representation of human interests," and to be distinguished from other arts by a specific difference. But the word "poetry" should not be used, as here, to designate merely form. On the contrary, it is a word vastly more significant and is no right antithesis to prose, when prose is used to designate a form of composition. We have the word needed, and can recast the definition thus: "Literature is the representation of human interests in artistic prose or verse."

But how shall we understand the word "representation?" It is his re-presentation of that which has already presented itself to the author. It is his expression of that which has impressed itself upon him. Here, then, is another difficulty. Is "representation" generally understood in this specific, psychological sense? Does it not rather call to mind pictorial or undramatic presentation? Though with explanation the word is not only available but in itself suggestive, it can be changed without material loss, and our definition may be made to read: *Literature is the expression of human interests in artistic prose or verse.*

Is this simple, intelligible, adequate, and helpful? I suppose the words "human interests" will be questioned on the ground, first, that they are not precise. But the subject-matter of literature is not to be denoted by any inflexible term. It may be urged, also, that "human" may be objective or subjective; that is, that the interests in question may have humanity for their object, or may make their appeal to humanity. We need not attempt to be too exact here for it is obvious that what involves human nature appeals to human nature. If literature has to do with passions or emotions that are universal it finds a large and sympathetic audience, if it deals with those things that enter but little into life it appeals to a limited few. In a word, life, the deep, central life of the inner man, is the most interesting thing in the world; in so far as literature is concerned in this, the deepest interest of humanity, it is of in-

terest to all mankind ; in so far as it eliminates this element, it lessens its own power. Of course the word "interests," as the plural shows, is not used in either a strict psychological or ethical sense. It means merely, that which concerns, bears upon, makes a part of, appeals to humanity, and embraces everything within the realm of human cognizance and appreciation.

Perhaps the word artistic may be considered too weak and unstable. It may mean so much or so little. But is it not characteristic of literature, while it demands right form as a preservative against speedy decay, that the form will not only vary in excellence, but that the degree of excellence must be determined by each judge or critic for himself? Literary judgments are never final ; they are always subject to revision and reversal. This makes the study of literature of peculiar interest. The individual judgment must be constantly employed in determining as well the nature and importance of the human interests involved as the degree of artistic excellence attained in the expression.

It will be admitted that prose and verse include all literary forms even though they may not always exclude each other. In literary work one is forced to note that concepts overlap or merge. The dividing lines are not sharp and distinct, but it seems to lend clearness to the definition to retain this division rather than to substitute the vaguer and less significant word, "language."

The difficulty increases if we leave form and try to divide literature itself into two mutually exclusive branches. One of them is poetry. What is the other? Coleridge suggests science as its proper antithesis, but he seems to have in view merely the end and aim of each, that of science being truth ; that of poetry, pleasure. This does not aid us and, for want of better terminology, we are forced to speak of "poetry" and "prose" using the terms generically and of "verse" and "prose" using the terms specifically. The inconvenience is obvious, when we wish to use the word "prose" in both senses in the same proposition. For ex-

ample, under our definition, poetry is the expression of human interests in artistic verse. Prose (generically) is the expression of human interests in artistic prose (specifically). But the objection here does not lie against the definition, it is against the inadequacy of our vocabulary.

As then the definition seems to contain all that comes under the term defined, let us see if it is capable of easy limitation. The definition has dealt with literature in general; what is national literature? Count "human interests" as one term and waive an apparent tautology, and "National literature is the expression of national human interests in artistic prose or verse." The only limitation needed here is that the subject-matter should be of such a character as to represent the nation or appeal to it. English literature, becomes under our definition the expression of human interests in artistic English prose or verse, if by English literature we mean generally literature in the English language, whether produced in America or England or Australia; but if it be necessary to distinguish between them, I believe, in the last analysis, the distinction would inhere in the nature of the subject-matter, the character of the human interests involved. If American literature means anything more than English literature in America it is this, that there are some themes peculiarly representative of ourselves, and peculiarly adapted to our comprehension and appreciation, and that the natural and best expression of these themes takes on a coloring peculiarly adapted to them. The human interests here treated are such as depict our American life, or such as, by virtue of their nature and their natural expression, obtain our American sympathies. American literature is the expression of American human interests in artistic prose or verse.

Other tests of the definition's availability suggest themselves. But there is one note that I would make here. The definition says nothing of books, writing, permanent form, and the like, for while it is conceded that for purposes of convenient examination and study, literature must have some

concrete, tangible form, it does not seem to be an essential characteristic of literature that it be written. When Tacitus describes the songs of the Teutons, and tells us how these poems were rendered, we are justified in speaking of the Teutonic literature, in this restricted sense of literature, even though we be unable to determine what place in the world's estimate it would occupy. If by the side of Tolstoi's written productions, which we class as literature, there should be delivered by word of mouth other utterances of his, no less effective, but unwritten because of the censorship of the press, should we decline to call these traditional utterances literature? If nothing remains of Patrick Henry's speeches but the well authenticated reports of their eloquence of thought and language, and the lasting influence of their exhortations, shall we say that Patrick Henry contributed nothing to literature? Surely any definition must include spoken as well as written discourse.

If the reader feels that this whole discussion is of little avail, because the proposed definition, if needed at all, is neither surprising in its contents, nor attractive in its form, he should remember that good definitions are simple; and if they are good definitions they are so partly by virtue of their very simplicity.

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